

CHAPTER NINE

SLAVERY AND EMANCIPATION

THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT SUPPORTED slavery. As the economy of the South grew, so did the number of enslaved people. Between 1790 and 1860, the amount of cotton that the South produced rose from one thousand tons a year to 1 million tons a year. In that same period, the number of slaves rose from half a million to 4 million. Slavery was so well established that only something enormous—something like a full-scale war—could end it.

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How can slavery be described? Maybe only people who have experienced it can say what it was like. People like John Little, a former slave, who wrote:

They say that slaves are happy, because they laugh, and are merry. I myself and three or four others, have received two hundred lashes in the day, and had our feet in fetters; yet, at night, we would sing and dance, and make others laugh at the rattling of our chains.

Happy men we must have been! We did it to keep down trouble, and to keep our hearts from being completely broken: that is as true as the gospel!

Desperation drove some slaves to revolt.

Probably the largest revolt in the United States took place near New Orleans in 1811. It involved four to five hundred slaves. The U.S. Army and militia forces attacked them and ended their revolt. In 1822 a free black man named Denmark Vesey tried to launch a revolt in South Carolina, but authorities found out about it and hanged him, along with thirty-four others. Then, in Virginia, in the summer of 1831, a slave named Nat Turner led about seventy others on a rampage from plantation to plantation. They murdered at least fifty-five men, women, and children. As their ammunition ran out, they were captured. Turner and others were hanged.

Other slaves ran away. Each year during the 1850s, about a thousand slaves escaped into the North, Canada, and Mexico. One famous escaped slave, Harriet Tubman, made nineteen dangerous trips back into slave territory, helping slaves escape on the Underground Railroad. She told them, "You'll be free or die."

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hated the rich planters and wanted to see their property destroyed. Fanny Kemble, a famous actress who married a Southern planter, wrote in her journal that black slaves and white Irish workers were kept apart when they were building a canal in Georgia. The Irish were a “warm-hearted, generous people,” she said, who “might actually take to sympathy with the slaves.”

The Abolition Movement

SOME WHITE AMERICANS DID “TAKE TO sympathy with the slaves.” They were called abolitionists because they called for the abolition, or end, of slavery. They bravely wrote newspaper articles and made speeches against slavery. They also helped many slaves escape on the Underground Railroad, a network of people who worked together to conduct runaway slaves to free territory, providing “safe houses” for them along the way. But black abolitionists were the backbone of the movement against slavery.

(left)
Underground Railroad,
1893.



The North had about 130,000 free blacks in 1830. Twenty years later there were 200,000. Many of them worked to free those who remained enslaved in the South. One of them was David Walker, son of a slave, who sold old clothes in Boston. He wrote a pamphlet called *Walker's Appeal*, urging blacks to fight for their freedom:

Let our enemies go on with their butcheries, and at once fill up their cup. Never make an attempt to gain our freedom or natural right . . . until you can see your way clear—when that hour arrives and you move, be not afraid or dismayed. . . . God has been pleased to give us two eyes, two hands, two feet and some sense in our heads as well as [the whites]. They have no more right to hold us in slavery than we have to hold them. . . . “Every dog must have its day,” the American’s is coming to its end.

The *Appeal* made southern slaveholders so angry that one of them offered a reward for David Walker’s murder or capture. One summer day in 1830 Walker was found dead near the doorway of his shop.

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery, learned to read and write, and escaped into the North at the age of twenty-one. He became the most famous black man of his time, speaking and

writing against slavery. Douglass called “the idea of being a free man some day” a dream that “all the powers of slavery” could not destroy.

After the war with Mexico, the U.S. government brought California and other new territories into the Union as nonslave states. In return, the government had to do something for the slave states, so it passed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. This law made it easy for slave owners to recapture runaway slaves even after they had fled to the Northern states. It made it easy for slave owners to just pick up free blacks they claimed had run away.

Northern abolitionists, black and white, fought against the act. The year after Congress passed the law, a runaway slave named Jerry was captured and put on trial. A crowd broke into the Syracuse, New York courthouse to set him free. On July 4, 1852, Frederick Douglass gave a speech that placed the shame of slavery on the whole nation, not just the South. He said:

Fellow Citizens: What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him more than all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. . . . There is not

a nation of the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of these United States at this very hour.

The government of the United States did not strongly enforce the law that ended the slave trade, yet it enforced runaway slave laws. The government under President Andrew Jackson worked with the South to keep abolitionist newspapers from being mailed in Southern states. The nation's Supreme Court declared in 1857 that the slave Dred Scott, even though he had lived for some time in free territories, could not sue for his freedom because he was property, not a person.

That government would never accept an end to slavery through rebellion. Slavery would end only under conditions controlled by whites, and only when it suited the business and political needs of the North. Abraham Lincoln was the perfect figure to bring about the end of slavery.

Lincoln understood the needs of business. He shared the political ambition of the new Republican political party. Finally, he spoke the language of doing good, and he could argue with passion against slavery on moral grounds. At the same time, he acted with caution in the

world of politics, and he feared that abolition would cause new problems. Although Lincoln believed that slavery was unjust, he could not see blacks as the equals of whites. The best thing to do, he thought, would be to free the slaves and send them back to Africa.

The Civil War and Slavery

THE NORTHERN ELITE, THE BANKERS AND businessmen who directed the economy of the North, wanted their kind of economy to expand. They wanted free land, free labor, and taxes that favored manufacturers. Lincoln shared their ideas. Southern planters, on the other hand, felt that Lincoln and the Republicans would make their own pleasant, prosperous way of life impossible. So when Lincoln was elected president in the fall of 1860, seven Southern states seceded, or left the Union. When Lincoln tried to take back the federal base at Fort Sumter, North Carolina, by force, four more states

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seceded. The South formed the Confederacy, and the Civil War was on.

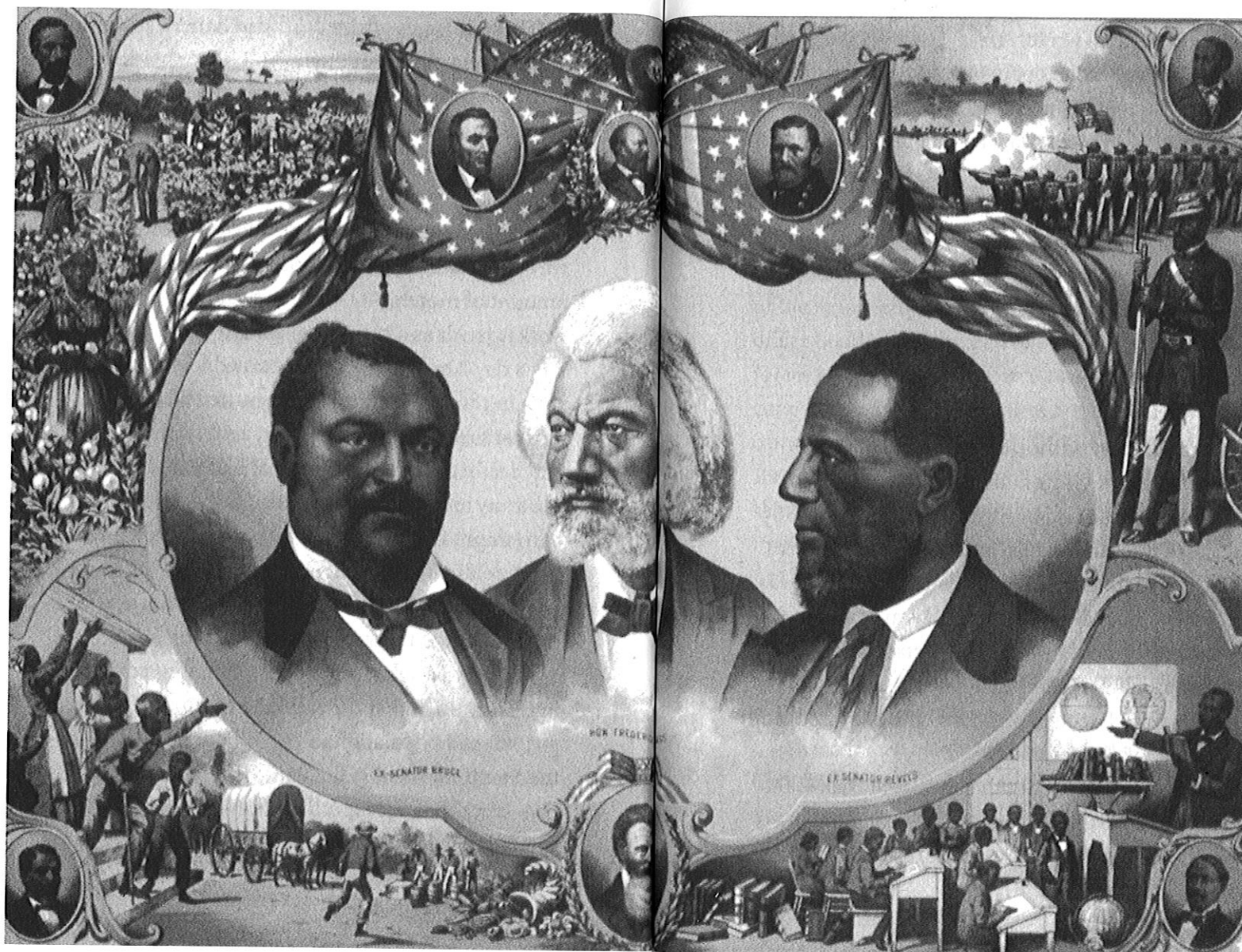
Abolitionists urged Lincoln to emancipate, or free, the slaves in the South. But Lincoln made it clear that he had not gone to war to free the slaves—his goal was to bring the South back into the Union. In a letter to abolitionist and newspaperman Horace Greeley, Lincoln wrote:

My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and it is not either to save or destroy Slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it.

But as the war grew more bitter and the North grew more desperate to win, Lincoln began to act against slavery. In September 1862 he gave the southern states four months to stop fighting, warning that he would free their slaves if they did not come over to the Union side. The fighting continued. On January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves in areas that were fighting against the Union. Two years later, before the war ended, Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which ended all slavery in the United States.

These changes affected African Americans in many ways—not all of them good. Once blacks were free to enter the Union army, the war started to look more like a war for black liberation. The more whites suffered, the more they resented blacks. Angriest of all were poor whites who were drafted into the army. Rich people could buy their way out of the draft for \$300. That was a huge amount of money. At that time the average skilled worker (such as a carpenter) earned about two dollars a day. Unskilled workers earned less. Draft riots in 1863 in northern cities turned whites against their black neighbors in a wave of violence and death. And the treatment of black soldiers in the army and the northern cities showed that freedom might not bring acceptance or true equality. Black soldiers were given the dirtiest and hardest work, and when they were off duty whites sometimes attacked them on the street.

The Civil War was one of the bloodiest conflicts in history up to that time. It killed 600,000 people, out of a population of 30 million. By late 1864, the South was losing. Soldiers were in short supply—but there were 4 million slaves. When some Confederate leaders spoke of enlisting slaves, one



Heroes of the Colored
Race Lithograph, 1881.

shocked general wrote, "If slaves will make good soldiers, our whole theory of slavery is wrong." In March 1865 Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, signed a law that let blacks serve in the army of the South. But before the law had any effect, the war ended. The South had lost, and its slaves learned that they were now free.

Emancipation without Freedom

MANY YEARS AFTER THE WAR, AFRICAN Americans who had been young children in 1865 recalled the tears, songs, and hope of the slaves who heard the news of their emancipation. It was a time of great celebration, the dawn of a new day. Yet many blacks knew that their status after the war would not depend on a law that made them free. It would depend on whether they owned land or had to work for others.

Much land in the South either went back to the families of the Confederates or was bought by Northern land speculators and investors. Blacks

could not afford to buy much of it. Ex-slave Thomas Hall said, "Lincoln got the praise for freeing us, but did he do it?" Hall felt that Lincoln gave the slaves freedom but did not give them the chance to support themselves. Freed slaves still had to depend on whites for work and survival.

The United States government had fought the slave states not to end slavery but to keep control of the enormous territory, resources, and market of the South. Still, the end of slavery brought new forces into politics. One force was white people concerned with racial equality. Some of them came south to teach or work for the Freedmen's Bureau that the government set up to aid the freed slaves. A second force was blacks determined to make their freedom mean something. A third force was the Republican Party. It wanted to keep control over the national government, and the votes of Southern blacks could help. Northern businessmen felt that Republican plans benefited them, so they went along for a while.

These forces created a brief period after the Civil War when blacks in the South voted, elected blacks to state legislatures and to the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, and introduced

free, racially mixed education. New laws protected them from discrimination and guaranteed them equal rights. But because blacks depended on whites for work, their votes could be bought or taken away by the threat of violence.

White violence against blacks erupted in the South almost as soon as the war ended. In May 1866, in Memphis, Tennessee, whites killed forty-six African Americans and burned more than a hundred homes, churches, and schools. The violence continued as white terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan organized raids, beatings, and racial murders called lynchings. The state of Kentucky alone had 116 acts of racial violence between 1867 and 1871.

As white violence rose in the 1870s, the national government grew less committed to protecting blacks. Northern politicians started to weigh the advantage of black voters' support against the advantage of a stable South controlled by whites who would accept Republican leadership. It was only a matter of time before blacks would be returned to a condition that was not far from slavery, even if they remained legally free.

In 1877 the Republican Party leaders made a deal to get their candidate, Rutherford Hayes,

elected president. In return for the necessary electoral votes, they agreed to remove Union troops from the South. This took away the last military protection for southern blacks. Their legal protection was crumbling, too, as the Southern states passed laws that chipped away at equality. By the end of the nineteenth century, the U.S. Supreme Court approved laws that allowed segregation, or separation of people by race. Only one Supreme Court justice, a former slave owner named John Harlan, argued against segregation, saying, "Our Constitution is color-blind. . . ."

With its economy in ruins, the South needed money. A new alliance formed between the Northern bankers and investors and the Southern elites. They talked about the "New South" of coal and iron mines, business and railroads. The former slaves were swept out of the picture. By 1900, all of the southern states had passed laws that kept African Americans from voting and from enjoying equal rights.

At this low point for black people in America, blacks knew that they had been betrayed. Some fled the South, hoping to escape violence and poverty. Those who remained organized for self-

defense, in the face of more than a hundred lynchings a year. Thomas Fortune, a young black editor for the *New York Globe*, told the Senate, "The white man who shoots a negro always goes free, while the negro who steals a hog is sent to the chain-gang for ten years."

W. E. B. Du Bois, a black man who came to teach at Atlanta University, saw the betrayal of the African Americans as part of something bigger that was happening in the United States. He said that poor whites and blacks were both being exploited, or used, by politicians and big business. Because whites could vote, they didn't think they were exploited. Du Bois said, though, that the "dictatorship of vast capital" limited the power of their votes. He was talking about the economic system called capitalism, in which private individuals or companies, rather than the state, own the farms and factories, set prices and compete with each other in the marketplace, and accumulate wealth.

Was Du Bois right? Did the growth of American capitalism mean that whites as well as blacks were in some sense becoming slaves?